

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVISORY COUNCIL
January 9, 2026 Meeting
Draft Minutes

PRESENT: Dominique Anders, Kathie Awaya, Will Carlson, Annette Cooper, Nancy Gorman, Martha Guinan, Natalie Haggerty, Stacy Haitzuka, Mai Hall, Amanda Kaahanui (staff), Helen “Kupu” Kaniho, Tina King, Dale Matsuura, Cheryl Matthews, Jessica McCullum, Trish Moniz, Wendy Nakasone-Kalani, Kau’i Rezentes, Susan Rocco (staff), Steven Vannatta, Lisa Vegas, Jasmine Williams

EXCUSED: Cherine Pai, Kiele Pennington, Susan Wood

ABSENT: Virginia Beringer, Mark Disher, Melissa Johnson, Siena Molina, Christopher Pelayo, Rosie Rowe, Scott Shimabukuro, Herbert Taitingfong

GUESTS: Grace Akau, Aleena Ashton, Michelle Arakawa, Laurie Chang, Roberta Hickey Gomez, Jackie Jackson, Sandy Jessmon, Leilani Kailiawa, Michael McGushin, Brikena White, Tracey Wiltgen

Welcome and Introductions

Chair Martha Guinan opened the meeting at 9:05 a.m. and asked Amanda Kaahanui to call roll call asking members and guests to introduce themselves and the office or stakeholder group they are representing.

Special Education Conflict Resolution Insights

Tracey Wiltgen, Executive Director and Roberta Hickey Gomez, Program and Outreach Manager from the Mediation Center of the Pacific began their presentation by acknowledging that special education is fertile ground for conflict.

Key issues of conflict

The areas where conflict is most likely to arise are in the design of the IEP, the delivery of services, and within working relationships.

- identification and eligibility (i.e. parent refusing an initial evaluation, findings of ineligibility, etc.),
- evaluation (i.e. disagreement over findings, requests for Independent evaluations, etc.),
- placement (i.e. self-contained or general education classroom, parent requesting reimbursement for private school, etc.),
- services and related services (i.e. more hours of a service, disagreement over the service provider, transition services, etc.),
- implementation of the educational program (i.e. compensatory services, inappropriate IEP goals, unfair treatment of student, etc.), and
- communication (i.e. among team members).

Specific areas of conflict within the previous year

Roberta reported on the issues addressed in mediation and IEP facilitation sessions over the last year. 46% involved communication issues among team members and between parent and school. When addressed early they can be resolved early and address the

child's needs. 12% involved FAPE issues. On a positive note, 78% of the cases involved disputes that had not risen to the level of filing for due process. MCP is working with various groups to get the information out that these services are available.

Early intervention

While early mediation helps to resolve issues quickly and maintain or even strengthen the parent-school relationship, many parents and school personnel view mediation as more formal and legalistic causing hesitation to utilize the service. MCP's experience is that even when parents report that the IEP isn't working, there are many parts of the program that are working and maybe only one or two areas where the team and parents are getting stuck and digging in their heels. The earlier that can be addressed through mediation, the more likely that the communication is maintained.

Benefits of early mediation

Some commonly acknowledged benefits include:

- preserving and strengthening relationships,
- keeping the focus on the student's needs,
- a faster and less stressful option for resolving differences,
- promoting creative, customized solutions,
- giving parents a voice,
- helping schools better understand the family perspectives, and
- building trust.

Mediation after a due process request

Mediation that occurs once a parent has filed a request for due process is still helpful, but it presents differently than early mediation in the following ways:

- Parties are more positional;
- The focus is on the law more than on interests and more on the past than future;
- The parties are less open to temporary or trial solutions;
- It is likely to be less flexible and more adversarial; and
- Final solutions are required or a hearing is the next step.

Questions/comments from members and guests

C. In many IEP meetings I've seen, the parent doesn't know what types of services are available, and when they ask for more information or data—like a behavioral assessment or a sensory profile--they are often shut down and told an assessment is not worth it, because the child is not going to qualify for that service. Some schools are even brazen enough to say it is a budget issue. A. A key issue is to have a conversation with the parent about what are all the possibilities and resources.

Q. How often do you receive requests for mediation that are initiated by the schools? A. Some schools will approach us about mediation, particularly when conversations have become more emotional or entrenched, but generally it is the parent that is requesting.

C. It seems that schools sometimes don't realize the effect that they have on parents. I accompanied a parent to a meeting yesterday, and the parent was devastated afterward, but there was no sense that the school reached out to her or acknowledged her discomfort. It felt very authoritarian—"this is our offer of FAPE."

C. Rather than the school acknowledging that things are not going well and that they might want to encourage mediation, they typically bring in someone from the district to be the final authoritative voice. A. We agree that it would be very important to teach principals and teachers how to address issues early and make the interaction better. There needs to be clear communication of why the district person is brought in—to share knowledge of all the available resources—rather than to wield power.

C. Training on early intervening would be even more powerful if you had a parent and an administrator as co-trainers. When groups are trained in silos, there is often a tendency to blame other groups for any problems that come up.

Q. When would you find it more appropriate for mediation? Parents seem to be requesting advocates more, and the intake process for advocates does not always go smoothly. A. I don't know why parents are asking for advocates more, but it may be to advise them on the law, which mediators cannot do, because we are impartial. I think mediation is always appropriate, because even if agreements are not reached, it generally gets people thinking differently and talking to each other differently.

C. I have worked with providing advocacy support to families, and often they need someone to help them understand the process and the roles of the IEP team members.

C. Unfortunately, one of our main advocacy organizations, Hawaii Disability Rights Center, has had to curtail some of their services due to federal funding cuts.

Q. When parents find out about mediation, and they ask the school for it, and the school refuses, there is a letdown to the parent. What is the next step for the parent who wants to move forward with solutions? A. I would suggest that the parent reach out to the Mediation Center of the Pacific (MCP) and let us try and talk to the school. Sometimes that can make a difference.

C. A lot of parents, if they're told no, will either buckle, pull their kid out of school, or aim for home hospital or in-home ABA services. Q. How we can mitigate this and encourage them to be more engaged in the school system? A. A parent who would go to the extreme of pulling their child out of school indicates a huge gap between family and school.

C. I hear a lot that the parents don't want to go the legal route. They don't want to cause a problem, because they do have a sense of respect for some of the teachers and others but they feel that their child is losing time, so let me try something different. We need a different approach to mediation, because mediation is traditionally seen as legal. A. You are right. Can we call this early mediation something else and still have DOE support MCP to provide the process and convey that this is not a legal fight, but it is a respectful way to talk about an issue that you can walk away from at any time? In the elder arena we offer a family conference process that is less formal where people can be engaged, but there is still a neutral mediator that can guide the conversation.

C. We had discussed with the Community Children's Council the potential of structuring peer-to-peer mentorships using more seasoned parents to connect with those who are new to IDEA. A. I know over the years the idea of a mentor for new parents has been discussed and would be very helpful.

C. Years ago, MCP offered a service called conciliation when the issue was personal disagreements. A. Yes, and it's about having an impartial person help facilitate a

discussion to work through issues so you can be heard. We just need to have a conversation with Brik, so we can offer it.

C. Instead of mediation perhaps using the term ADVOCACY would be a better option.

C. Enrichment?

C. Ho'oponopono?

C. (Brik White) If the word mediation is a trigger for our parents and it is related to the law, then we need to do whatever is needed to encourage both our schools and our parents to come together and work collaboratively.

C. (Martha) Thank you Tracey and Roberta for your participation and leadership. We are very interested in conciliation, and you can keep in contact through Brik or directly through Susan Rocco.

SEAC Dispute Resolution Committee Report

Steven Vannatta reminded members that this committee was formed several years ago to help reduce conflict between families and schools and to help shine light on the shortage of plaintiff attorneys to represent families who want to opt for a due process hearing. The committee reactivated earlier this year to find solutions at different stages of conflict between home and school. Kiele Pennington helped to frame the Committee's twelve recommended actions for SEAC and the larger system into a document reflecting a tiered approach to dispute resolution support. It includes a) intervention & awareness (prevention), b) conflict resolution (early/mid-level intervention), and c) dispute resolution systems (direct family supports). Steven asked members to discuss the document in small groups, come up with their top 3 or 4 priorities for SEAC action and report back to see if the larger group can coalesce around some top priorities. (See Attachment A for the ranking of recommendations).

Gathering Input on Potential Improvements to the SPP/APR Partner Engagement Meeting

Brik White began by thanking all who attended and the December 5th SPP/APR Partner Engagement Meeting that drew over 160 participants, both in person and online. Members and guests were asked to join small group discussions to provide feedback on what would improve upon the process for the coming year by answering the following two questions:

1. What about the way the December SPP/APR meeting was organized or facilitated made it easier for you to participate?
2. What is a barrier that made it harder to participate, and what is one change we should make to improve our next SPP/APR stakeholder meeting?

Organization/facilitation comments included:

- Venue was great;
- Parking was easy;
- Ease of movement throughout, including to the breakouts;
- Getting to meet others and mingle/network;
- Great information with the keynotes, especially;
- Diverse groups, so there was a lot of sharing and learning from one another;

- Having school-level presenters with a powerful message;
- Loved having the virtual option;
- The keynote was great and relevant to both families and DOE;
- Very well planned;
- Having mixed audiences where you don't know who you are sitting next to and you're just having a conversation about the information (not hiding behind titles or being separated);
- When participants see outcomes, they feel their participation is value-added and may be more encouraged to participate in the future;
- Having the real-life example of the bright spot inclusion program helped people see that the data helps to impact and make improvements for kids;
- Door prizes and other little things that made the meeting fun; and
- The facilitators in the different sessions did a good job to ensure that people were included in the discussion.

Barriers making it harder to participate

- Parents must take time off from work, and that's often a decision and a sacrifice;
- Some kupuna got caught in the rain walking to another building for a breakout;
- Tech issues in some of the breakout rooms causing delays to be connected—especially for the people joining virtually;
- The announcement/invitation could have been a bit more friendly/welcoming;
- After the great conversations in the breakout rooms, uncertainty about what is going to happen next with that information; and
- The difficulty of a December meeting with lots of competing priorities.

Recommended improvements

- Not only cover parent expenses, but also compensate them for attendance;
- Spread greater awareness so more people know about it and participate, like parents and administrators;
- Have an introduction at the beginning to go over the agenda for the day for people who are there for the first time;
- Set up a little expo for different agencies to come and tell what they have to offer;
- Allow more time to get feedback from the audience;
- Feature some of SEAC's priorities and accomplishments that align with the event's general theme;
- Break down participation data by role groups and reach out to the groups that were underrepresented in 2025;
- Draw more parents by encouraging them to come to get to know the people who are servicing their children and build relationships as well as hear about some of the successes;
- Need to ensure that the information about the meeting gets sent far and wide to as many different groups as possible, so that we have input from as diverse a group as is possible;

- Provide follow-up to the participants to indicate their voices have been heard and taken on board, so they will be more inclined to participate in the future; and
- Consider having the meeting on a weekend or non-school day so more teachers can participate.

Review of Minutes for the November 14, 2025 SEAC Meeting

Susan Wood offered minor corrections to the November meeting.

Action: The minutes were approved as corrected.

Input from the Public

There was no input from the public.

Announcements

Amanda Kaahanui made two announcements:

1. The SPIN Conference will be on Saturday, March 28th at the UH Manoa Campus Center, and SEAC members get a complimentary registration to attend. Airfare scholarships are also available to neighbor island parents. A SEAC table will be included in the resource room, so SEAC members who are willing to help man the table are asked to notify SPIN. SPIN is seeking donations from the community to cover the costs, so members who are aware of potential donors are also asked to notify Amanda.
2. The Oahu Footsteps to Transition Fair will be held virtually on February 21st from 9:00 a.m. to noon and is available to anyone who is interested. In March, Maui's Footsteps Fair will be in person at the Maui High School Library on March 10th from 5:00 – 6:30 p.m., and East Hawaii's Fair is on March 25th from 1:00 to 6:00 p.m. at the Arc of Hilo.

Agenda Setting for the February 13, 2026 Meeting

Members offered the following suggestions for agenda items for the February meeting:

- HIDOE Legislative Priorities
- Budget Report
- SEAC Legislative Committee report and voting on bills
- Dispute Resolution Committee update
- Update from Jennifer Wolfshiemer
- Developmental Disabilities Division to present on Lifecourse Tools, how to develop service plans, what does eligibility/intake look like, or other topics (February or March meeting)
- Infographics/podcasts discussion.

11/14/25 SEAC Dispute Resolution Committee Recommendations

Attachment A – SEAC Ranking of Dispute Resolution Committee Recommendations: Strengthening Family Support in Dispute Resolution

Purpose: To improve outcomes and reduce conflict between families and schools, SEAC recommends a tiered approach to dispute resolution support, beginning with broad awareness and prevention, followed by early conflict resolution, and culminating in targeted, system-level supports for families in formal dispute processes.

A. Intervention & Awareness (Prevention)

Goal: Build shared understanding, early access, and consistent messaging before disputes occur.

Ranking on 1/9/26	Action	Description / Intended Impact
Priority 2	1. Align website information across platforms	Standardize information across DOE central, local schools, and public libraries. Require all schools to include or link to a special education information page.
Priority 3	2. Collaborate with sister agencies (EI, DOE, DOH, etc.)	Develop unified messaging and shared outreach materials across agencies to reduce family confusion during transitions.
Priority 4	3. Leverage Family Engagement Centers (Title I)	Partner with Family Engagement Centers (and PCNCs) to provide special education resources and training through existing family networks.
Priority 1	4. Develop micro-learning and video tools	Offer short, accessible formats (YouTube, social media, a SEAC podcast) to engage families who may not read formal documents. Share success stories.
Priority 3	5. Distribute support materials through IEPs	Provide materials and videos directly during IEP meetings (including a

11/14/25 SEAC Dispute Resolution Committee Recommendations

		welcome pamphlet); extend education to entire family systems, not just parents. Build in time in each meeting for continuous improvement & reinforcement. Have a follow up survey to see if parents still have questions.
Priority 4	6. Strengthen Early Intervention outreach	Integrate early guidance on rights and processes for families transitioning from EI to DOE to prevent later disputes. Establish identified points of contact so families know who to go to.

B. Conflict Resolution (Early / Mid-Level Intervention)

Goal: Build skills and systems to resolve issues at the earliest stage possible.

Ranking on 1/9/26	Action	Description / Intended Impact
Priority 4	1. Promote existing informal and formal processes	Increase awareness and access to facilitated IEPs, mediation, and complaint procedures through family-friendly materials (including “A Parent’s Guide to Partnership in Special Education”).
Priority 4	2. Enhance PTI collaboration	Work closely with Parent Training and Information Centers to align training, messaging, and support pathways for families.
Priority 5	3. Address high-conflict topics	Provide focused information and training on common dispute areas — private providers, related services, parent training, and transition coordination.

11/14/25 SEAC Dispute Resolution Committee Recommendations

C. Dispute Resolution Systems (Direct Family Support)

Goal: Ensure families have equitable access, transparency, and tools during formal dispute processes.

Ranking on 1/9/26	Action	Description / Intended Impact
Priority 4	1. Develop a Pro Se Family Guide	Create a plain-language guide for parents representing themselves in due process or complaints, with timelines, rights, and sample templates.
Priority 4	2. Integrate system-level coordination	Align procedures across DOE, DOH, and EI to ensure consistent handling of overlapping services or disputes.
Priority 3	3. Provide visual process tools	Develop flowcharts, checklists, and templates for staff and families to clarify steps and timelines in dispute processes.

Note: comments in purple indicate additional content added on 2/9/26.